

Book reviews

Human Rights in Health

Edited by Katherine Elliot and Julie Knight

(Pp 304; no price given).

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What happens when fundamental ethical assumptions are taken seriously – when hard-headed technicians, planners and scientific theoreticians set out to plan the application of 'basic human rights'? This volume, the product of a Ciba Foundation symposium, presents the efforts of 28 contributors to explore the implications of 'adopting' four fundamental human rights in health: safe drinking water, sufficient food, protection against communicable disease and access to the means of controlling fertility. The symposium was held in 1973 – the 25th anniversary year for both the UN's Declaration of Human Rights and the World Health Organization. The affirmation by WHO that good sanitation and adequate nutrition are 'inalienable human rights' strengthened the view of Ciba's planners that the four rights are a minimum goal for humanity – along with a fifth, the right to access to some form of health care. Published symposia often cover an enormous amount of material. This one avoids the disappointment of too much covered too lightly with no focus. The papers and discussions begin with basic acceptance of the agenda: to try to state, as realistically as possible, what it would take to fulfil these 'birthrights' for persons in poor and underdeveloped communities in the world. There are no professional ethicists among the contributors; thus the book is, intentionally, short on analysis of what is a 'right' in philosophical, theological, legal or political terms. There appears to be an early acceptance of Himsworth's definition of a right as being 'an

expectation in respect to matters affecting the interests of the individuals within a particular society which the consensus of opinion in that society accepts as justifiable.' Implicit in the work of several of the contributors, however, is an assumption of a more universal notion of a right; the tension between somewhat vague universal norms and a territorially limited, culturally based concept provides some of the most lively potential debate within the discussions. 'Potential' must be emphasized, because the published remarks focus on presentation of views with a minimum of space given to argument.

A model for consideration of financial resources is offered. Whether water is a right to be claimed or an economic good to be marketed is examined. The greatly overlooked question of human milk production stands out in the wide array of food issues. Health services and education in China come in for repeated observation in the concern for preventive medicine and programmes for controlling communicable disease. In what must be a recognition of the vast literature available elsewhere, the section on fertility control is the shortest. The most intriguing chapter proposes a 'package' approach to describing the group of medical interventions which constitute a human right in personal care. A philosophical statement of a right is one thing; quite another is a quantification of that right in terms of the capacity of the community to deliver certain 'groups' of services to individuals within the community. It is suggested that such packages have the advantage that 'they are at the same time both an exact way of defining rights in personal health care, and a valuable administrative tool for implementing them'.

Moral philosophers, as well as medical professionals, will find much of value in this book since it deals in realities of programming human

values. Some of the conflicting values in approach are explicit but need further elaboration; others are implicit and require identification and analysis. One will find a wide array of ethical assumptions demonstrated in the thinking of the contributors. (All of the ethical theories described by A V Campbell in his well known *Moral Dilemmas in Medicine*, for example, can be found to have been presupposed at one point or another throughout the book.) A clear instance is the set of appeals to utilitarianism and the common good in consideration of cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis and the recognition that assumptions might very well need to be questioned on the basis of other concepts, such as the respect for persons, if the rights of the individual are to be protected in the midst of political decisions. Problems of distributive justice are struggled with and, in many cases, met head on throughout the deliberations.

Maurice King, of WHO, points to a central need in the study with his recognition that those taking part had fallen short in consideration of the 'biological and ethical background to human rights'. His conviction that a human right is but the corollary of 'a species-wide obligation' places the issue in the context of what moral philosophers have known as 'social solidarity,' perhaps the best organizing principle for what this book has to offer.

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Law and Ethics of AID and Embryo Transfer

Ciba Foundation Symposium 17 (new series): Associated Scientific Publishers (Elsevier): Amsterdam, London, New York. 1973.

This volume deals with artificial insemination by a donor and embryo transfer, first in relation to the biological aspects of these topics,